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ABSTRACT

This handbook for urban school staff provides guidelines and resource materials for implementing school needs assessment and communicating information about programs, services, and events in the school district to the community. It presents field-tested methods which have been utilized in a number of the largest public school districts. Part 1, on the topic of establishing and conducting a school needs assessment summarizes the eight major procedures that should be followed in conducting a needs assessment. It also contains suggested materials for improving school community communications, such as the outline of an exemplary student handbook and a parent survey for use as continuous evaluation of school/community relations. Parts 2 and 3 provide information to help improve the school communication effort, particularly at the individual school building level. The second part of the handbook focuses on using the printed and spoken word to communicate information to various groups. Suggestions are given on how to use the media and the services of the school systems communication specialists. Part 3 contains information and resources that can improve face-to-face situations and obtain feedback from various groups. Emphasis is given to meetings and committee work. (The study that developed this document is reported in CE 024 197.) (YLB)

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ASSESSING AND IMPROVING SCHOOL COMMUNICATIONS: A HANDBOOK FOR STAFF DEVELOPMENT

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
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EDUCATION

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CE 025 199

Public attention is focusing more intently upon education today than ever before. This is good because the public needs to be aware of the complex problems inherent in providing quality education for our youth.

Awareness by itself is important, but awareness does not become useful in the school-improvement process until it leads to understanding, which is the product of deliberate communications efforts. This document has been prepared by Dr. Keith D. Barnes, while serving as a National Fellow with the National Center for Research in Vocational Education, to assist urban school staff in establishing effective communications within the school system and between the schools and various community groups. Althouth a tremendous volume of communication has been generated about urban schools, each of us should be searching for new ways to improve the quantity and quality of communications in our school programs and services.

This handbook can assist you in three critically important communications areas:

* ASSESSING SCHOOL PROGRAMS AND SERVICES;
* COMMUNICATING INFORMATION ABOUT THESE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES; AND
* ENCOURAGING PEOPLE TO WORK TOGETHER.

Dr. Barnes also has prepared resources to assist urban school staff in developing new approaches in the organization of career guidance and counseling activities and in the area

of evaluating the program effectiveness of urban school guidance and counseling programs. They have been cited in the bibliography of this publication. We encourage you to carefully study these new approaches and invite your comments and criticisms.

Robert E. Taylor
Executive Director
The National Center for
Research in Vocational
Education
The Ohio State University
1980

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PART ONE

ASSESSING YOUR SCHOOL'S PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES

Assessing School Needs

The term "needs assessment" has taken on greater significance in recent years. With the advent of the accountability movement, school officials and the general public have begun to look at education from a number of new and interesting perspectives.

Needs assessment is one way to systematically and objectively examine school programs and services. It is important that all educators have at least a general understanding of needs assessment methodology and how it can be used to measure the scope of a school's needs.

What follows is a summary of the major procedures that should be followed in conducting a needs assessment. The summary is based on Ohio's "Needs Assessment Guidelines."[1] The summary does not cover the total range of procedures and processes associated with needs assessment activities, but references are made to available resources that can provide the interested reader with a more comprehensive understanding of the finer points of needs assessment.

How to Conduct a Needs Assessment

There are eight basic steps or procedures to follow in conducting a needs assessment.

1. "Needs Assessment Guidelines," Ohio Department of Education, Division of Research and Planning, (Columbus, OH: 1975), pp. 2-14.

Step 1: The Committee

The first step in conducting a needs assessment is to select a needs assessment committee. The composition of this committee will vary depending on the type of needs assessment and the level on which the needs assessment will be conducted.

The committee should be composed of representatives of groups which have responsibility for the area to be assessed and persons who will be directly affected by the results of the needs assessment. Depending on the type and level of the needs assessment, the committee might include central office administrators, principals, teachers, counselors, psychologists, parents, students, and persons from the community.

It is critical that the responsibilities of the needs assessment committee be clearly delineated. It is advisable that a time schedule for the completion of key needs assessment activities be developed. In other words, the committee should be given a specific charge and a deadline to complete its work.

Step 2: Goals

The next step is for the needs assessment committee to carefully define the critical area(s) to be studied. When the area(s) have been identified, the committee prepares goals and sub-goals for each area. The committee may generate its own goals and sub-goals, use existing district goals and sub-goals, obtain goal statements from other educational agencies,

or purchase commercially prepared goals.[2] The goals may be in the area of school-community communication, student achievement, staff development, etc.

Step 3: Survey

Next, the committee determines the perceived educational needs. This is done by collecting information on the importance of each sub-goal in relationship to other sub-goals, and determining the degree to which various groups feel these sub-goals are being achieved. A method for determining perceived educational needs is contained in Ohio's Needs Assessment Guidelines.[3]

The major tasks associated with conducting the survey include:

1. Developing and reproducing the survey instrument.
2. Determining which groups will be asked to respond to the survey instrument.
3. Determining the number of people from each group who will be asked to respond to the survey instrument.
4. Drawing a sample of people in each group (if necessary).
5. Distributing the survey instruments.
6. Collecting the survey instruments.

The survey instrument is developed from the list of goals and sub-goals approved by the needs assessment committee.

---

2. Ralph Hoepfner, et al., "Elementary School Evaluation Kit" (Los Angeles, CA: Center for the Study of Evaluation, 1970).

3. Needs Assessment Guidelines, Ohio Department of Education, pp. 3-7.

Step 4: Assigning Priorities

From the data collected in Step 3, the committee assigns priorities to the perceived educational needs. Through this process the committee determines the perceived needs that will be the focus of the rest of the needs assessment process. If the number of sub-goals is small, the committee may wish to skip this step and access all the perceived needs.

Some factors to consider in making decisions about the number of areas to be assessed are: (1) the size of the discrepancies when one considers what actually exists and what should exist in a given goal area; (2) cost; (3) difficulty in measuring the discrepancy; and (4) time available to assess the discrepancy.

The committee may agree to consider only the top five to ten goal areas identified by the survey.

Step 5: Set Desired Levels

In this step the committee sets the desired conditions, or "what should be," for each of the perceived needs. For example, if one of the perceived needs is improved reading achievement at the primary level, the desired condition might be: On Text X, 60 percent of the first, second, and third graders will score at or above grade level with no pupil falling below the 33rd percentile. Similar statements are developed for each perceived need.

Step 6: Determine Actual Conditions

The committee next determines the degree to which the

desired conditions are being achieved. This is done through the collection of data on measures identified in Step 5.

The methods for determining the actual state could involve buying and using standardized tests, using criterion-referenced tests developed by teachers, or using other measures to determine the actual conditions. In many cases, the necessary information may be collected as part of the district's testing program or the teacher's pupil evaluation procedures.

If data normally collected during the school year are not adequate, a number of sources can be consulted. A large number of standardized tests are discussed in Buros' Mental Measurement Yearbook[4] and in Measuring Human Behavior.[5] In addition, many educational organizations maintain files of performance objectives and related test items which may be purchased.[6]

In situations where formal testing results will not be providing adequate information (for example, when the perceived need being measured is in a noncognitive area), use

4. Oscar K. Buros, ed., Mental Measurement Yearbook (Highland Park, NJ: Gryphon Press, 1972).

5. Dale G. Lake, Mathew B. Miles and Ralph B. Earle, Jr., eds., Measuring Human Behavior (New York: Columbia University Teachers College Press, 1973).

6. One such file is available under the title: Quality Education Program Study (Doylestown, PA: Bucks County Public Schools, 1971). This study resulted in a compilation of numerous instruments for measuring each of Pennsylvania's ten state goals for education. These goals range from basic skills to self-understanding.

should be made of any pertinent data from school records, follow-up studies of school graduates, dropout studies, and so forth.

Step 7: Comparing the Actual With the Desired

If the statements describing the desired conditions have been properly written, it should be possible to make direct comparisons between these statements and the actual conditions. The discrepancies between the desired and the actual conditions are called the "real educational needs." These discrepancies are expressed in terms of such things as the percentages of students not reaching the desired conditions.

Step 8: Assigning Priorities

Finally, the committee assigns priorities to the real educational needs. This is done primarily on the basis of the size of the discrepancy between the desired conditions and actual conditions. Other factors that should be considered are: (1) ranking given each need by each group involved in the survey; (2) logic behind the statement of desired status; (3) relationship between the statement of desired status and the actual status of student achievement; (4) validity and reliability of any standardized tests that were used; and (5) validity of any sampling strategy used to determine actual status.

Finally, when group consensus is reached regarding the top five or ten needs identified by the committee, an action

plan should be written which has as its primary purpose the narrowing of discrepancies between the actual and desired levels identified by the needs assessment process. The action plan format should have four categories: (1) required activity; (2) person(s) responsible; (3) needed resources; and (4) recommended completion dates.

By establishing such a plan (organizing activities, making people responsible for certain actions, identifying resources, and setting time limits for the completion of these activities), one can reasonably expect some significant and even dramatic changes to occur in the needs areas identified by the committee.

Summary

This, then, is what needs assessment is about. It is a process for determining the educational needs of a school or school system. The needs assessment procedure should --

1. Use the "discrepancy" approach to determine needs.
2. Include a method for assigning priorities to identified needs.
3. Obtain input from parents and other community members in addition to input from professional educators and students.
4. Begin with broad statements of educational goals.
5. Assess needs in a broad range of areas including student achievement.

6. Involve the setting of expected levels of goal achievement.

7. Use a variety of measures in determining reasonable educational needs.

If you desire counsel or assistance in conducting a needs assessment, please make contact with the director of the Department of Evaluation, Research and Planning.

School-Community Communication: An Important Needs Assessment Area

One of the major findings established by a national survey of secondary schools was the existence of considerable variability in the quality and content of the student handbooks used in senior high schools. If a school were to use the following outline of suggested topic areas, a needs assessment committee could begin to produce a dramatic improvement in the quality of handbooks. The outline is adapted from the contents of an existing exemplary student handbook.

Student Handbook Content Outline

1. Absence regulations
2. Athletics
3. Automobiles, bicycles, motor bikes and motorcycles
4. Bell schedule
5. Bus
6. Change of address
7. Cheerleaders
8. Class officers
9. Class rings
10. Commencement speakers
11. Conduct
12. Counselors
    a. To whom assigned
    b. Types of assistance available and times
    c. Telephone numbers for appointment
13. Dress and grooming
14. Drill team
15. Entering the building
16. Extra class activities

Student Handbook Content Outline (cont.)

17. Fees and fines
18. Fire drill instruction
19. Floor plans (each floor)
20. Grading policy and procedures
21. Honor roll
22. Illness during day
23. Library
24. Locks and lockers
25. Lost and Found Department
26. National Honor Society
27. Nurse
28. Publications
29. Pupil Personnel (school psychologist, visiting teacher, HSCA)
    a. Names
    b. Role
    c. Obtaining services
30. Respect for property
31. School calendar
32. Selective service
33. Senior pictures
34. Snack bar
35. Soft drinks
36. Staff
37. Student council
38. Student loading and unloading
39. Students of the month
40. Study aids
41. Study halls
42. Supplies, school
43. Tardiness
    a. To school
    b. To class or study hall
44. Telephone
45. Textbooks
46. Transistor radios and tape recorders
47. Use of tobacco and chewing gum or substitutes
48. Withdrawal
49. Working permit

Another major recommendation was that schools assess the results of their communication efforts on a continuous basis. The following instrument is adapted from one developed by Project PRIMES.[7] It can be of considerable help in identifying strengths and weaknesses in school-community communication. While the instrument was specifically designed for use at the elementary school level, it can be further adapted for use by junior and senior high schools.

School/Community Relations
Evaluation Instrument
Parent Survey

Good communication between parents and the local school is in the best interest of the child to meet his or her

7. "Project PRIMES: Progress Research in Meeting Elementary Standards" - a three year ESEA Title III effort. (The Department of Evaluation, Research and Planning of the Columbus Public Schools, 1973), p. 14.

individual needs in the development of the school program. With this in mind, would you please take a few minutes to respond to the following questions? Since there is no need to sign the questionnaire, you are encouraged to respond as frankly as you can. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Please check the sources from which you receive most of your information about your child's school.

a.	Newspaper - Daily -	_____
	Weekly	_____
b.	Radio	_____
c.	Television	_____
d.	Principal	_____
e.	Teachers	_____
f.	School meetings	_____
g.	Other parents	_____
h.	Your child	_____
i.	Printed materials from the school	_____
j.	The central office of the school system	_____
k.	Other (please explain)	_____

_____

_____

_____

2. Overall, which one of the following statements best describes your child's school?

a.	Keeps us fully informed	_____
b.	Gives us some information	_____
c.	Gives us little information	_____
d.	Gives no information	_____

3. When your child's school gives you information about its program, which one of the following statements reflects your feelings?

a. Always complete and accurate information _____
b. Usually complete and accurate information _____
c. Seldom complete or accurate information _____
d. Never complete or accurate information _____

4. When you have a question or problem about school, whom do you usually contact first?

a. The principal _____
b. A classroom teacher _____
c. Someone in the system's central office _____
d. Another parent _____
e. Someone on the Board of Education _____
f. Other (please explain) _____

_____

_____

5. Do you usually get action from the person you checked above?

Yes ___ No ___

6. When the school has a P.T.A. meeting or special program, what is your usual reaction?

a. I try to go because I know it is important. _____
b. I try to go when I think the topic is useful. _____
c. I try to go but it's usually not worth the time. _____
d. It's usually a waste of time so I don't go. _____
e. I should go more often but I don't seem to find time. _____
f. I usually never attend school meetings for various reasons. _____

7. How often do you attend parent-teacher conferences?

a. Every time they are scheduled. _____
b. Only when I think my child is having a problem. _____
c. I have never attended such a conference. _____

8. Which of the following groups are available to parents at your school? (Please check all that apply.)

a. PTA _____
b. Advisory boards _____
c. Room mother's group _____
d. Mother's club _____
e. Father's club _____
f. Volunteer programs _____
g. Building evaluation committee _____
h. Other (please explain) _____

_____

_____

9. Each school attempts to communicate to its local community on the topics listed below. Please check the amount of information you feel you have received from your local school on the following topics:

Topic	About the right amount of information	Not enough information	Never receive information
a. The school's program in:			
(1) Math	_____	_____	_____
(2) Science	_____	_____	_____
(3) Reading/ Language arts	_____	_____	_____
(4) Creative arts	_____	_____	_____
(5) Social studies	_____	_____	_____
b. The local school's policies and rules	_____	_____	_____
c. The school system's rules and policies	_____	_____	_____
d. The progress and achievement of my children	_____	_____	_____
e. The quality and achievement of the school's staff	_____	_____	_____
f. New methods and materials used in the school's program	_____	_____	_____

10. For each of the topics listed below, please check the source of your information. If you receive information about the topics from more than one source, please check all that you feel apply.

Topic	Source: Teachers	Building Principal	Your Child	Other Parents	Board of Education	P.T.A. Meetings	Parent/Teacher Conferences	Special Meetings at School	Parent Handbook	Daily Newspaper	Weekly Newspa-	Radio
The local school's policies and rules.												
The school system's policies and rules.												
The progress and achievement of my children.												
The quality and achievement of the school's staff.												
New methods and materials used in the school's program.												
The school curriculum or subject areas.												

11. Do you think your local school does an effective job in its public relations program?

a. Needs quite a bit of improvement. ____
b. About average, but could be better. ____
c. Above average, continue as is. ____

12. Do you have any suggestions for improving your school's public relations program?

PART TWO

COMMUNICATING INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL'S PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Effective School-Community Communication

An effective school-community communication effort has at least three characteristics. First, the communication involves a two-way process in which the school system provides accurate and timely information about its programs and services, and provides avenues for various groups (students, parents, community) to give the school district feedback on the effectiveness of the programs, services, and the communication effort itself. Second, the school-community communication effort provides information in such a manner that groups obtain a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, problems, and needs of the school district. Third, an effective school-community communication effort encourages public involvement in the communication effort itself, and provides opportunities for various audiences to communicate face-to-face with staff members of the school district.

Parts Two and Three of this handbook provide information that can help improve the school-communication effort, particularly at the individual school building level. Part Two focuses on using the printed and spoken work to communicate information to various groups. Suggestions are

given on how to use the media and the services of the school system's communication specialists. Part Three helps to complete the process by giving suggestions on how to communicate effectively in face-to-face situations, and how to obtain feedback from various groups.

Assisting in the Communication Effort

The school district's departments of Publications and Public Affairs, and Public Information can be of considerable assistance to professional staff members as they attempt to communicate information about programs and services to parents and the community.

The primary purpose of these two departments is to report the important events of the school system clearly and accurately to the community. All phases of communication are utilized in an effort to keep the general public informed about what is happening in the schools. Written, oral, and visual information is aimed at the public in a manner to further advance its knowledge about the school system. This is done by planning, preparing, and disseminating information which will reflect the policies of the Board of Education, the achievements of the faculty and students, the various activities in the schools, and the programs and services offered by the Columbus Public Schools.

If you have information about a newsworthy activity or

development, this should be reported to:

_____
Director of Public Information

_____
Address

_____
Telephone

The Appendix contains a format for reporting your information and the name of persons who can be of assistance in your communication efforts.

If news copy accompanies your information, it will be checked for completeness, edited, and forwarded to various news media and/or used in staff and community publications. If a story is being planned for an upcoming activity or program, a news release before that program occurs is best. This means the facts should be sent in advance. In this way the newspapers, radio and TV stations and your Department of Publications and Public Affairs can prepare for their coverage carefully.

Finding and Publicizing School News

Good School News

"They say dogs and kids make a good story. We don't have the dogs, but just look at the children, each and every one, all potential stories!"[8]

8. "The Principal's Guide to School News Reporting" (Peoria, IL: Peoria Public Schools, 1973), pp. 11-22.

When looking for school news, think in terms of the child--not the institution; think primarily in terms of the individual child--not always the group.

The following outline may alert you to good story subjects in your own school:

1. School progress and achievement

   a. Individual students who have overcome handicaps to accomplish objectives. This might be students with physical or mental handicaps.

   b. Success stories of students and graduates. Be aware of students' outside activities. Often they are related to, or dependent on, school work. These stories show the value of particular school programs.

   c. The student who has done well in a subject through unusual or exceptional effort.

   d. Student awards, honor rolls, graduations, contests, school festivals, or other student-centered events.

2. Methods of instruction

   a. Special projects carried out by a class.

   b. Any project that is unusual, interesting, or carried out in a different way.

   c. Results of new methods of instruction in comparison with the old way. This is particularly good if a marked response is found to the new method, or if there is something concrete to report on student learning.

3. Health of students

   a. Information about special student health services that are available (e.g., clinics, special youth services in the community).

   b. Special health projects carried out by a class (e.g., a class study of a health problem).

4. Discipline and behavior

   a. Good deeds.

   b. Patriotic displays.

   c. Good manners projects, etc.

5. Teachers and officers

   a. Professional activities of teachers and administrators: Conferences and conventions attended; election or appointments to a professional office; professional honor awards; book or article publication; special recognition of any kind of professional work or community activity.

   b. Teachers' meetings or workshops.

6. Attendance

   a. Attendance records of unusual length, or perfect attendance under usual circumstances.

   b. Attendance contests.

7. School buildings

   a. Unusual use of classrooms or equipment.

   b. Historical significance of older buildings.

   c. Innovative use of facilities.

Where to Look

The best contact with news is through the people around you. The following is a summary of techniques that will be helpful in finding school news.

1. Make staff members aware that you are interested in communicating information about your school's or department's programs and services. Post a permanent explanatory note with your deadline on a bulletin board.

2. The teacher is probably the best source of information about the way a particular program or service is

working in the classroom. Enlist the aid of teachers and ask them to submit background information or stories about their classroom activities.

3. Enlist the aid of students--even to the extent of having youngsters from a particular grade or class write the story.

4. Visit classrooms to see what activities or projects are under way. Sometimes a teacher may not recognize that a particular event or activity is newsworthy.

5. Collect school news or special stories through class projects. Each week or month a different class can cover the school.

6. Ask the school secretary and custodian about specific aspects of your programs and services. Both are usually good sources of information and sometimes can give the human interest side to what is occurring in the school.

7. Read the stories that other schools are able to secure in papers and school district publications. This will help you to develop a sense for what constitutes news.

Preparing Written Copy

Newspapers insist upon clean (error free) copy that is double spaced. The news item should be brief with only the essential details included. Whenever possible, include the names of individuals. Always identify by title or position each person mentioned in the news item. Editors will sometimes accept a brief outline for writers to use in building a story.

Place your name, the name of your school and your telephone number in the upper left hand corner of each page of copy.

When preparing information for a radio or television presentation, apply the same guidelines as those given for newspaper copy. Ask the Department of Public Information or the Department of Publications and Public Affairs to help you get your story told to the public.

Keep in mind that special events can be publicized through the use of radio and television "spot" announcements.

Newsletters

Newsletters can be an effective vehicle for communicating school information. The following ten "tips" can assist you in making your newsletter as effective as possible.

1. Establish a regular schedule for newsletters. It's better to publish frequently with fewer pages than it is to publish infrequently with many pages.

2. Secure a pre-printed letterhead that can be run off in sufficient quantities for a full year. The news stories can be mimeographed later at distribution time. Avoid the use of paper that is too light and prohibits the use of the back side for mimeographing.

3. Keep writing simple and to the point. Stay away from educational terms that only school people understand.

4. Avoid cartoons and drawings unless they can be adequately reproduced. Make certain illustrations, if used at all, add to the overall image of the school.

5. Keep paragraphs brief. Avoid long sentences that make for difficult reading.

6. Check periodically on the efficiency of the distribution system. Utilization of students as distributors may be inexpensive but it is far from efficient. Consider making telephone calls to parents to determine if they received the last newsletter and if they have any questions.

7. Add reminder news items to any given issue. For example: school hours; noon hour procedures; PTA meetings, etc.

8. Conduct a brief interest survey among a sampling of parents to determine what they want to read about.

9. Consider sending special editions at particular times of the year. One might be a back-to-school issue that is mailed to the home in late August.

10. Keep track of the kind of telephone calls that come into the school office for a three and four day period. Analyze the kinds of questions parents have, and then make certain that future issues deal with those concerns.

Summary

Your communication effort should provide information in two major areas. First, parents and students should be provided timely and accurate information that will enable them to take full advantage of available programs and services. A directory of programs and services and course selection information, for example, can be helpful in this regard. Second, the communication effort should provide a picture of the special activities, events, and accomplishments that highlight the movement of students and school district toward desirable educational and community goals.

On the Positive Side

While school districts face many challenges, one should keep in mind many of the positive aspects and accomplishments of the schools. These positive aspects and accomplishments can serve as motivating factors to students, parents, and the community. For this reason communication efforts should reflect the many positive conditions that exist in the school district. This section of the handbook should close with some interesting facts about your school district.

Ten Big Pluses

1. We have an excellent school system. We are individually enthusiastic in making this endorsement because each of us feels that we have an opportunity to contribute to our high standards of quality education.

2. The performance that maintains these standards is a joint effort on the part of all personnel.

3. We pride ourselves on our reputation for excellence as attested by outside recognition.

4. Many of our services are possible because ours is a large system. However, we do not pride ourselves on size alone, but rather on the fact that despite our size, we can boast of open communication lines throughout the system.

5. The administration of our schools makes a concerted effort to involve teachers, students, parents, and the community at large in school affairs.

6. We have never been satisfied with the status quo. Ours is a record of growth and innovation.

7. We have viewed criticism and dissension as indications of need for assessment and evaluation which, in turn, have frequently resulted in constructive changes and new programs.

8. We are broadly tolerant of divergent educational philosophies as reflected in curriculum variations. The staff at each school is allowed latitude in tailoring its program to meet the needs of its students. Students and parents have, in many instances, contributed to the development of these programs.

9. The high professional standards of teachers are evidenced in part by the number of teachers who participate voluntarily in professional organizations, and who hold graduate degrees or are enrolled in graduate schools.

10. In-service programs are designed to help teachers keep abreast of current educational thought, issues, and research. Our programs are usually planned by teachers themselves or as the result of interests stated by teachers.

Some Facts and Figures*

Here is some interesting information about our school systems that you may wish to incorporate into publications or communication activities.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

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8.

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10.

11.

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13.

14.

15.

*Detail in this section fifteen factors and/or figures which makes your school district outstanding and worthy of the interest of the media.

PART THREE

HELPING PEOPLE WORK TOGETHER

Introduction

Certainly, the printed and spoken word are important means of communicating, and this short booklet can be helpful in improving your skills with each. But the ultimate communication systems are those which help people work together at peak efficiency and productivity. The bottom line in any communications effort has to be the degree to which people understand each other. Often what people are, or project themselves to be, speaks louder than what they are saying. Skills and well considered plans often go begging if they are under-utilized or misunderstood. All individuals in our school system, to be effective at what they are doing, have a special obligation to themselves and to those with whom they come in contact to maximize their communications skills.

Part Three contains information and resources that can help improve face-to-face communication. Emphasis is given to meetings and committee work. While no attempt has been made to cover all the many skills needed to communicate successfully with students, parents, and the community, information on how to improve skills in some of these areas is given.

Successful Meetings and Group Work

Planning a Meeting

Organizing and conducting meetings can be influenced by the format the meeting takes and the methods used in conducting the meeting. The following is a list of possible meeting formats and the chief characteristics of these formats. It is important that the purposes for meeting be clearly defined in planning so that the appropriate format or combination of formats is utilized.[9]

1. Lecture, film, or illustrated presentation
   a. Chief characteristic: Communication of information, principally in one direction, from speaker-to-audience.
   b. Special usefulness: Systematic presentation of knowledge, exposure to experts, possibly inspirational in nature.
   c. Limitation: Little or no opportunity for audience participation.
2. Panel presentation
   a. Chief characteristic: Information-sharing among panel members with information given to audience; opportunity for audience to obtain clarification after panel discussion is completed.
   b. Special usefulness: Provides audience with differing ideas on a topic.

9. "Putting Words and Pictures About Schools Into Print" (Washington, D.C.: The National School Public Relations Association, 1971).

c. Limitation: Little generation of new ideas or determination of a course of action to follow.

3. Informal "buzz" group
   a. Chief characteristic: Potential for 100% participation by members of large audiences.
   b. Special usefulness: Provides for active individual involvement in large group settings.
   c. Limitation: In-depth discussion is difficult to develop.
4. Small group meetings
   a. Chief characteristic: Can obtain 100% participation in discussion; generate ideas; obtain commitment to a plan of action.
   b. Special usefulness: Provides for active individual involvement in the group; provides an opportunity to obtain novel ideas for attacking a problem.
   c. Limitation: Requires effective leadership and planning.

When working in a specific topic or problem area, the meeting planner may wish to organize a series of meetings that will utilize several different meeting formats. For example, there may be an initial need to have a specialist in the topic area make a presentation to the group. Later, individuals may function best in a small group setting where

they can use the information they have obtained to attack a particular problem area. Select your meeting format carefully.

A major item in planning a group meeting is the selection of a speaker or consultant for the group. Two important considerations in the selection process are: (1) the kind and degree of expertise of the potential speaker; and (2) the speaker's ability to communicate and relate to people. Whenever possible, it is best to select someone whom you have heard or seen make a presentation, or someone you know by reputation.

The person planning a meeting should assume the role of a details expert. The following five items should be of help in assuring that major tasks have been completed. While they are particularly geared for meetings of small task-oriented groups (e.g., needs assessment or curriculum committees), the list of details can also be of assistance in planning other types of meetings.

1. Select the meeting room facilities carefully. The room should be large enough to fit the needs of the communication to occur, such as allowing for small groupings. Avoid podiums or desks since they may become barriers to communication. Some of the advantages of sitting in a circle are: (a) each participant has the unobstructed view of his or her

fellow group members; (b) face-to-face contact increases the opportunities to receive and send non-verbal messages; and (c) a circle arrangement encourages greater participation of all since no member is seated at the head of the table.

2. Distribute meeting reminders about a week before the meeting. Such information as a brief overview of content, consultant name(s) if applicable, meeting time, date of meeting, and location of the meeting should be included. A map may be useful if the location is unfamiliar to the participants. Also, send this information to the consultant or speaker.
3. On the day of the meeting, arrive early to check seating, arrangements for refreshments, audio-visual equipment, etc., and to deliver other necessary supplies such as handouts. It is also important to be early in order to greet people and help them feel welcome. If the facility is unfamiliar to the convener, a quick visit a week in advance can save a lot of last minute changes.
4. Furnish refreshments whenever possible even if it's just coffee and tea. This seems to aid in establishing a warm environment conducive to participation.

5. On the day of the meeting, plan to take several pads of newsprint for keeping records of ideas, tape to display the newsprint, small pads of paper and writing materials for those who want to take notes, and handout materials if needed.

Conducting the Meeting

The following is a list of items that a convener of a group should consider in conducting a meeting.[10] Not all items are applicable to every meeting.

1. Before the meeting:
   a. Review the agenda.
   b. Appoint a secretary to take minutes.
2. During the meeting:
   a. Call the meeting to order promptly.
   b. Lead the group in establishing agenda priorities and in specifying the time to be spent on each agenda item.
   c. Keep the group at the task (i.e., monitor discussion and inform the group when it strays from agenda item at hand).
   d. Keep the group to its time commitments for each agenda item.
   e. Be attuned to feelings of confusion and try to clarify them.
   f. At the end of each agenda item:

10. Richard A. Schmuch and Philip J. Runkel, Handbook of Organizational Development in Schools (Palo Alto, CA: National Press Books, 1972), pp. 25-41.

(1) Check to be sure that everyone who desires has had a chance to contribute to the discussion.

(2) Check whether anyone is not clear about where the matter now stands.

(3) Summarize or ask someone else to summarize. Be sure that the secretary has recorded the summary.

g. Take process checks whenever they seem appropriate:

(1) Regarding satisfaction of group members with their participation.

(2) Regarding decision-making being done.

h. Conduct or ask someone else to conduct a debriefing session during the last ten minutes of the meeting. Consider the following:

(1) Did we accomplish our goals for the meeting?

(2) Did we use our resources effectively?

(3) Did we avoid pitfalls such as wasting time?

i. Review all activities that must be carried out by group members prior to the next meeting. When applicable, set the date, time, and place for the next meeting.

j. Call the meeting to a close promptly.

Effective meetings carry forward the work requirements of the group and maintain functions which help group

members develop satisfying personal experiences. If your meeting is in difficulty, look for the following symptoms:

1. Excessive time spent in details and repetition of obvious points.
2. Ignoring suggestions for improvement.
3. Private sub-group conversations.
4. Domination of discussion by two or three people.
5. Polarization of members on issues.
6. General inability to paraphrase another's point of view.
7. Apathy in participation.
8. Attack against ideas before they are completely expressed.

One or more of the following techniques may be helpful when a meeting is in trouble.

1. Taking a survey - A member states what information is desired from the total group in order to clarify positions on a specific issue. Some other member then paraphrases or clarifies the question until all understand what is being said. Each group member, in turn, briefly states his or her personal current position on the topic in two or three sentences. When everyone completes this process, the facilitator or another group member asks one or two members to summarize the group's positions. This is not a vote

nor does it bind individuals or the group. This procedure is used to clarify and to aid in group movement on a topic.

2. The right to listen - During crucial periods of a meeting before someone new speaks, the ideas of the person who has just finished speaking should be paraphrased to the satisfaction of that person. Before a proposal is decided upon, several people should paraphrase the proposal so that everyone is clear as to what issues are being considered.
3. Sub-grouping - Sub-grouping can be used to expand active participation in a large group. Interrupt the meeting for a short period while groups of four to seven persons discuss an issue. This is important when a major decision must be made and some group members hesitate to express their views before the entire assembly. One member of each sub-group may want to summarize the ideas and feelings of the group members without indicating which persons express them. This helps a group discover opposition which might hamper implementation and lets the group know if it is ready to reach agreement.
4. Fish bowl (or theater-in-the-round) - This procedure encourages participation within a large group allowing

some of the advantages of small group discussion within the setting of a large meeting. A small group is formed within a circle of the larger group. The small group discusses whatever is on the agenda as the other participants observe. Empty chairs within the inner circle can allow members of the larger group a chance for participation on a temporary basis. The inner circle may be selected on a random basis; this is especially productive if used for a specific reason such as involving students at a parent-student meeting or those who are usually silent. Another procedure is to allow participants to volunteer to join the inner circle.

In assessing how the group is functioning, you may wish to examine the group's interaction in one or more of the following areas.

Participation. This is one indication of involvement in verbal participation. Look for differences in the amount of participation among members.

1. Who are the high participators?
2. Who are the low participators?
3. Do you see any shift in participation (e.g., highs become quiet; lows suddenly become talkative)? Do you see any possible reason for this in the group's interaction?

4. How are the silent people treated? How is their silence interpreted?--Consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Fear? etc.
5. Who talks to whom? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?
6. Who keeps the ball rolling? Why? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?

Influence. Influence and participation are not the same. Some people may speak very little, yet they capture the attention of the whole group. Others may talk a lot but generally are not listened to by other members.

7. Which members are high in influence? That is, when they talk others seem to listen.
8. Which members are low in influence? Others do not listen to or follow them. Is there any shifting in influence? Who shifts?
9. Do you see any rivalry in the group? Is there a struggle for leadership? What effect does it have on other group members?

Styles of influence. Influence can take many forms. It can be positive or negative; it can enlist the support or cooperation of others or alienate them. How a person attempts to influence another may be the crucial factor in determining how open or closed the other will be toward being influenced. Items 10 through 13 are suggestive of four styles that frequently emerge in groups.

10. Autocratic: Does anyone attempt to impose his or her will or values on other group members or try to push them to support his or her decisions? Who evaluates or passes judgement on other group members? Do any members block action when the discussion is not moving in the direction they desire? Who pushes to "get the group organized?"

11. Peacemaker: Who eagerly supports other group members' decisions? Does anyone consistently try to avoid conflict or unpleasant feelings from being expressed by pouring oil on the troubled waters? Is any member typically deferential toward other group members (in effect, giving them power)? Do any members appear to avoid getting negative feedback? Who will "level" only when they have positive feedback to give?

12. Laissez faire: Are any group members getting attention by their apparent lack of involvement in the group? Do any group members go along with group decisions without seeming to commit themselves one way or the other? Who seems to be withdrawn and uninvolved? Who does not initiate activity, participates mechanically, and only in response to another member's question?

13. Democratic: Does anyone try to include everyone in a group decision or discussion? Which members express

their feelings and opinions openly and directly without evaluating or judging others? Who appears to be open to feedback and criticisms from others? When feelings run high and tension mounts, which members attempt to deal with the conflict in a problem-solving way?

Decision-making procedures. Many kinds of decisions are made in groups without considering the effects of those decisions on other members. Some people try to impose their own decisions on the group, while others want all members to participate or share decisions that are made.

14. Does anyone make a decision and carry it out without checking with other group members (self-authorized behavior)? For example, such a person might decide on the topic to be discussed and immediately begin to talk about it. What effect does this have on other group members?
15. Does the group drift from topic to topic? Who "topic-jumps"? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?
16. Who support other members' suggestions or decisions? Does this support result in the two members deciding the topic of activity for the group ("handclasping")? How does this affect other group members?
17. Is there any evidence of a majority pushing a

decision through over other members' objections? Do they call for a vote (majority support)?

18. Is there any attempt to get all members to participate in a decision (reach a consensus)? What effect does this seem to have on the group?
19. Does anyone make any contributions which do not receive any kind of response or recognition? What effect does this have on the members?

Task functions. These functions illustrate behaviors that are concerned with getting the job done, or accomplishing the task that the group has before them.

20. Does anyone ask for or make suggestions as to the best way to proceed or to tackle a problem?
21. Does anyone attempt to summarize what has been covered or what has been going on in the group?
22. Is there any giving or asking for facts, ideas, opinions, feelings, feedback, or searching for alternatives?
23. Who keeps the group on target? Who prevents "topic-jumping" or going off on tangents?

Maintenance functions. These functions are important to the morale of the group. They maintain good and harmonious working relationships among the members and create a group atmosphere which enables each member to contribute maximally. They insure smooth and effective teamwork within the group.

24. Who helps others get into the discussion ("gate openers")?

25. Who cuts off others or interrupts them ("gate closers")?

26. How well are members getting their ideas across? Are some members preoccupied and not listening? Are there any attempts by group members to help others clarify their ideas?

27. How are ideas rejected? How do members react when their ideas are not accepted? Do members attempt to support others when they reject their ideas?

Group atmosphere. Something about the way a group works creates an atmosphere which in turn is revealed in a general impression. In addition, people may differ in the kind of atmosphere they like in a group. Insight can be gained into the atmosphere characteristic of a group by finding words that describe the general impressions held by group members.

28. Who seems to prefer a friendly, congenial atmosphere? Is there any attempt to suppress conflict or unpleasant feelings?

29. Who seems to prefer an atmosphere of conflict and disagreement? Do any members provoke or annoy others?

30. Do people seem involved and interested? Is the

atmosphere one of work, play, satisfaction, taking flight, sluggishness, etc.?

Membership. A major concern for group members is the degree of acceptance or inclusion in the group. Different patterns of interaction may develop in the group which give clues to the degree and kind of membership.

31. Is there any sub-grouping? Sometimes two or three members consistently agree and support each other or consistently disagree and oppose one another.

32. Do some people seem to be "outside" the group? Do some members seem to be "in"? How are those "outside" treated?

33. Do some members move in and out of the group (e.g., lean forward or backward in their chairs or move their chairs in and out)? Under what conditions do they come in or move out?

Feelings. During any group discussion, feelings are frequently generated by the interactions between members. These feelings, however, are seldom talked about. Observers may have to make guesses based on tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and many other forms of non-verbal cues.

34. What signs of feelings do you observe in group members: anger, irritation, frustration, warmth, affection, excitement, boredom, defensiveness, competitiveness, etc.?

35. Do you see any attempts by group members to block the expression of feelings, particularly negative feelings? How is this done? Does anyone do this consistently?

Norms. Standards or ground rules may develop in a group that control the behavior of its members. Norms usually express the beliefs or desires of the majority of the group members as to what behaviors should or should not take place in the group. These norms may be clear to all members (explicit), known or sensed by only a few (implicit), or operating completely below the level of awareness of any group members. Some norms facilitate group progress and some hinder it.

36. Are certain areas avoided in the group (e.g., talk about present feelings in group, discussing the leader's behavior, etc.)? Who seems to reinforce this avoidance? How do they do it?

37. Are group members overly nice or polite to each other? Are only positive feelings expressed? Do members agree with each other too readily? What happens when members disagree?

38. Do you see norms operating about participation or the kinds of questions that are allowed (e.g., "If I talk, you must talk;" "If I tell my problems, you have to tell your problems.")? Do members feel free

to probe each other about their feelings? Do questions tend to be restricted to intellectual topics or events outside of the group?

After the Meeting

Following the meeting the convener should review what took place during the meeting, and plan the next steps to be completed. When applicable, meeting minutes should be prepared and sent to the participants.

Persons desiring information about the in-service document may contact:

_____
Name

_____
Title

_____
Address

_____
Telephone

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this handbook is to assist members of the professional staff in assessing and communicating information about the many programs and services and events taking place in our school district. Emphasis is given to working with parents and other members of the community with little being said about the critically important teacher-pupil relationship. In this regard it is well to remember the following quote as we work to improve communication.

> "The children are perhaps the most influential of a school's publics. Much of the information and the attitudes held by the general public are transmitted from pupil to parent to public on the community grapevine. There is no surer route to a person's heart - or resentment - than through his child. When the program of a school system rests on a foundation of classroom accomplishment, it is like a house built on a rock. Ill-founded criticism will not overwhelm it. The pupil's role as an intermediary is a strategic one. Public relations, truly, starts in the classroom."[11]

11. Scott M. Cutlip and Allen H. Center, Effective Public Relations. 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), pp. 3-17.

APPENDIX

Format For Submitting Information

TO:

FROM: School or Department _____

Person Reporting _____

News item, activity, or event:

What?_____

When?_____

Where?_____

Who?_____

Why? (or other details)_____

_____

Additional news or feature possibilities_____

_____

Signed_____

Date_____ Phone_____

COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

List below those school personnel and departments which can give assistance to staff in preparing news items, holding meetings, finding meeting facilities and the like.

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